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Soviet Hostility to 'Star Wars' Reflects Strategic Concern—Or Is It Economic?

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Although the Soviet Union appeared to soften its opposition to the U.S. Strategic Defense Initiative at last week's superpower summit, both U.S. and Soviet officials believe SDI looms as a major obstacle in future arms talks.

The joint statement Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and President Reagan issued after their Geneva meetings called for deep cuts in nuclear arsenals, without referring to Moscow's earlier insistence that the U.S. must abandon SDI before the Soviet Union will agree to significant arms reductions.

U.S. officials said negotiating that wording was crucial to getting a joint statement that helped make the summit appear constructive and successful. But Mr. Gorbachev and other Soviet officials made it clear after the summit that the change was temporary, just a change of words, rather than a change of position. They stressed that the U.S.S.R. will be unbending in its opposition to the SDI program, which President Reagan has described as a "space shield" series of defenses against nuclear weapons.

'Take a Look'

In his lengthy press conference following the joint statement, Mr. Gorbachev noted that he had warned President Reagan "to take a careful look at the whole of SDI."

Soviet arms-control experts attending the summit amplified Mr. Gorbachev's remarks, explaining that their fear of SDI is deeply rooted in the overall Soviet nuclear strategy, which seems closely related to "Mutual Assured Destruction," the doctrine that dominated U.S. strategic thinking in the 1960s and early 1970s.

The basic theory of MAD is that one side won't attempt a nuclear strike if it knows the other side has enough surviving nuclear weapons to launch a devastating counterattack.

Oleg Bikov, vice director of Russia's Institute of World Economy and International Relations, explains that any introduction of defensive systems, such as space satellites with the capability to destroy an incoming nuclear-missile warhead, would "transform the entire equation of our strategic relationship."

Roalde Sagdeev, director of the Soviet Union's Institute of Space Research, adds that "it will be very dangerous to remove us from the deterrent approach." He stresses that the Soviets are much more comfortable with the mutual standoff of large nuclear arsenals that evolved in the 1970s.

Mr. Sagdeev, a theoretical physicist, says Soviet analysts don't believe the U.S. can create a totally effective shield. What the U.S.S.R. fears, he says, is a partial shield that could blunt a limited Soviet nuclear attack.

Strike Weapons?

Such a capability, he asserts, might tempt the U.S. to strike the Soviet Union first, knowing that it could partially block a response from remaining Soviet nuclear forces. That is one reason, he explains, why the Soviets call SDI "strike space weapons," an offensive-sounding term used almost daily in the Soviet press.

Another possibility, according to Mr. Bikov, would be a temptation to use a space-based defense system to knock out Soviet satellites, a move that would provoke similar retaliation and leave both sides unable to communicate with their forces during a crisis. Both U.S. and Soviet military commands depend increasingly on satellites.

Reagan administration analysts have suggested that the real Soviet objection to SDI stems from a reluctance to make the heavy economic commitment to a defensive arms race. The Soviet response by Mr. Gorbachev was: "If they continue along that (SDI) path, we have said we will find a response, and our response is less costly and can be implemented more rapidly."

While Mr. Gorbachev didn't describe this strategic response, Mr. Bikov and Mr. Sagdeev say it takes the form of enhancements to offensive nuclear weapons. "Our deep belief is that the best response on our side is not to copy the defensive approach," says Mr. Sagdeev.

Two possible countermoves, they said, would be to give Soviet intercontinental ballistic missiles a shorter, faster boost phase and to fit them with more decoys or simulated nuclear warheads that would confuse U.S. defenses.

The Fervent Sell

The two Soviet experts, close students of the U.S. debate over "Star Wars," say they agree with U.S. analysts who worry that the world would face tricky, strategically dangerous transition problems if both the U.S. and the Soviet Union began to move toward defensive systems while cutting offensive arsenals. Mr. Sagdeev says the "religious-type language" Mr. Reagan uses to sell the program overlooks the uncertainties a move to SDI would create.

In an effort to block SDI, he says, Soviet negotiators will press for U.S. reaffirmation of an earlier interpretation of the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Systems treaty that would prohibit the development of SDI weapons. For extra measure, he says, the Soviets also will press for a new treaty banning anti-satellite weapons because such tests might be used as a cover for SDI development.

In his news conference following the summit, Mr. Gorbachev said he is aware that U.S. analysts believe SDI will exploit computer technology, an area where the U.S. maintains a major lead over the Soviets. He recalled that in the 1970s the U.S. attempted to make a similar technological leap, using its miniaturization and electronics skills to create multiple, independently targeted reentry vehicles, known by the acronym MIRV.